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ABSTRACT

In the fifth and sixth weeks of a faculty strike at York University (Ontario), a survey was undertaken to assess student perceptions of the strike, its benefits, and its costs. Respondents were 502 randomly selected full-time undergraduate students in several disciplines. Survey questions were developed in student focus groups. The report describes the survey's methodology and results in the following areas: student characteristics; central issues in the strike; long-term benefits for students at the institution; impact on student schedules; academic costs; economic costs; impact on student stress levels; relative importance of strike-related problems and other problems students encountered during the year; support for the faculty action; concern over strike impact; institutional communication about the faculty action; student involvement in strike-related activities; and satisfaction with the academic program. Results indicate the students did not feel improvement in their education would be an outcome of the dispute, but felt considerable academic and economic hardship and did not feel the faculty union or administration had students' best interests in mind. Only about one-third of respondents supported the action, but many expressed satisfaction with their academic program at the university. (MSE)

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The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint

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Centre for Research in Higher Education

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The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint

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Introduction

On March 20, 1997 the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) went on strike. While many on campus believed that the dispute would be short, the conflict dragged on for several weeks. As a result, the academic term was extended and the Spring examination period was postponed. Moreover, until the strike was over, many students were unaware of where they stood with regard to work that had not been completed, how they would be required to make up time lost through the strike, and the status of final examinations.

In order to examine the conflict from the students' point of view, in the fifth and sixth weeks of the strike, a telephone survey was carried out with 502 randomly selected full-time undergraduate students in the

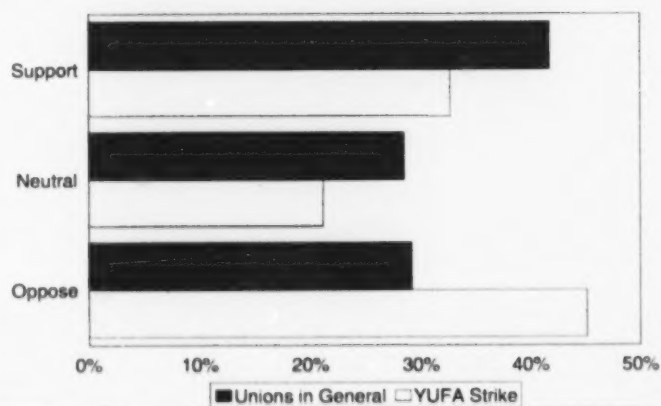
faculties of Arts, Fine Arts, Environmental Studies, Pure and Applied Science, Education, the Schulich School of Business, and

was to determine the ways in which the strike had affected students' lives.

The total number of full-time undergraduate students enrolled in the faculties from which the sample was taken was 19,287. Those not included in the study were enrolled at Atkinson College (the evening part-time operation of York University), Osgoode Law School, and in the Faculty of Graduate Studies. In essence, the survey focussed on typical full-time undergraduate students at York University.

In order to clarify some of the information obtained in the survey, where appropriate, statements made by students in focus groups, in open-ended questions in the survey, and on the Student Strike Action Coalition web site, are included in the text.

Student Support for Unions in General and YUFA Strike



Glendon College. (Only 21 students refused to participate in the study.) A sample of this size is accurate within 4.4 percentage points nineteen times out of twenty. All interviews were carried out by York students working part-time at the Institute. Also, most of the questions asked in the survey were suggested in focus groups with York students in which the objective

Who Are the Students?

In the main, York's students do not come from wealthy families. As in other surveys carried out with York students, in this study, 15% reported parental incomes of \$26,000 or less. A further 32% gave estimates between \$26,001 and \$50,000. In essence, a minimum of 47% of students came from families in which the average family income was below the provincial average. Forty three percent reported parental incomes between \$50,001 and \$100,000. Only 10% came from families with incomes over \$100,000. Seventy seven percent of students lived at home with their parents.

I am a fourth generation Irish immigrant. My family came over here at the turn of the century and struggled to make a better life than they had in Ireland. It has taken four generations for me to be the first member of my family to make it to university. I have had to work to be here. I have had to drop out of school twice for financial reasons. I am an 'A' student. I fear that I am not only the first generation of my family to come to university, but also the last.

Thirty eight percent of survey respondents were male and 62% were female. Administrative records indicate a similar gender distribution for the population from which the sample was selected. Also, administrative records show that the proportions of students in the survey coming from various faculties are comparable to the proportions in the

total population. In essence, approximately 65% are from the Faculty of Arts, 10% from Pure and Applied Science, 7% from Fine Arts, and the remainder from other faculties.

The Main Issues

For YUFA the main issues in the strike included pay, pensions, class size, and the introduction of new instructional technology. The administration was most concerned with the extent to which it had the financial resources to meet YUFA's demands.

I really do think it's all about the money. Because if we take, for example, other universities, their class sizes are way bigger than ours.

There's no way the strike would have lasted this long if it was solely about class size and teaching conditions. All of that would have totally been agreed upon a long time ago.

When students were asked, in an unprompted question: "What do you think is the single most important issue that faculty and librarians are concerned with in the strike?" 71% said money, pay, compensation, or wages. Nine percent mentioned pensions, 8% said they did not know, and only 5% mentioned class size. Technological change was mentioned by 1% and other issues by 6% of respondents. Despite the emphasis placed by YUFA on educational issues, from the students' point of view, compensation was by far the most important issue in the strike.

Benefits of the Strike

In order to determine the extent to which students felt that they might derive some long-term benefits from the strike, they were asked: "After the strike, do you think that the education students get at York will be better than in the past, about the same as in the past, or worse than in the past?"

In reply, 66% said about the same as in the past, 17% replied worse than in the past, only 9% felt that the quality of education would be better than in the past, and 8% said 'don't know'. Clearly, from the students' point of view, the strike is unlikely to have any long-term educational benefits.

The Strike Context

Students reported that because of the strike 72% of their classes had been cancelled. In 27% of these, there had been some attempt to tie up loose ends before the strike. Eighty three percent of students believed that such efforts should have been expended in all classes.

The survey was started on the same day that Senate announced that in courses where 35% or less of the final mark was based on a final exam students had the option of accepting their course average to date as their final mark. As a result, we can view students comments on final exams and other course requirements as reflecting both the impact of the strike and Senate's attempt to deal with its consequences.

The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint

Students reported that in 43% of their courses the term would be extended to make up for time lost in the strike. In 45% of courses students stated that they would have to complete a final exam or performance on campus.

It's nice that students with exams worth 35% or less don't have to write. I was not any less inconvenienced than other students just because my exam is worth more.

To a large degree, students' satisfaction with arrangements made in their courses to make up for time lost during the dispute reflects the number of courses in which there remained unfinished business. Overall, 46% of survey respondents were dissatisfied with make-up arrangements; a further 10% said that arrangements had not yet been made or that they did not know what arrangements were in place; 16% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; and 27% were satisfied.

Academic Costs of Strike

In order to identify potential academic costs of the strike, a series of questions were asked in which students indicated whether or not particular aspects of their academic lives had caused them concern. If they replied in the affirmative, students were then asked if the issue under consideration was of minor concern, medium concern, or major concern.

I don't know what to expect right now. I don't know when to hand in my thesis, and I don't know when to do my presentations and stuff. And that kind of stresses me out and I can't really concentrate on what I'm doing right now, because I don't know what to expect.

The issue that caused the most concern among students was the open-ended nature of the strike. In total, 96% of students were concerned with simply not knowing when the strike would end. Seventy five percent saw such uncertainty as a major concern.

The second issue of concern to students was the possibility that the nature of assignments, tests, and exams might change because of the strike. Eighty seven percent of students were worried over this possibility. For 60% this was a major concern.

The time that the strike is on, you would have lost time to learn the material that would have been presented to you.

Forgetting materials that might be on the final exam was of concern for 78% of students. For 59% forgetting exam materials was a major concern.

The fact that important materials might not be covered in courses was a cause of concern to 71% of students. For 35% this possibility was a major concern.

The possibility that time lost during the strike might affect the care professors devoted to marking was

expressed as a concern by 69% of students. Fifty nine percent stated that this was a major concern of theirs.

A belief that the circumstances surrounding the strike might contribute to students not achieving sufficiently high marks to qualify for, or stay in, particular programs was of concern to 65% of respondents. For 46% it was a major concern.

I have 14 courses. I need to take summer school in order to graduate next year. I hope to god they are not cancelling it.

Forty one percent of students expressed concern that the strike would interfere with their plans for summer school. This was a major concern for 34%.

At a general level, 39% of survey respondents believed that the strike had negatively affected their academic self confidence. Seventeen percent of students indicated that the negative impact of the strike on their academic self confidence was a major concern.

I am supposed to be graduating this year and have already started a full-time job. I still have 4 essays and 2 exams left.

A substantial number of students, 17%, were worried that the strike would affect their plans for graduation. Twelve percent of students indicated that interference of the dispute with their graduation plans was a major concern.

The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint

For 15% of students, the fact that grades would not be available to send potential employers was a source of concern and for 11% it was a major concern.

The possibility that grades might not be available for applications to other schools was raised as a concern by 13% of students. Eleven percent indicated that unavailability of grades for this purpose was a major worry.

From the foregoing it is clear that the strike had a major effect on the academic lives of students. A further series of questions indicated that for many the conflict also resulted in financial hardship or interfered with part-time jobs.

Economic Costs of Strike

It is hard to go out and find a job when you cannot even tell a potential employer when you will be available to work.

I asked for four days before the exam free so I could study. So now if it's pushed later, I'll have to ask people to work for me or ask them to change my hours. And they make the schedule, like, two months in advance.

The most frequently mentioned way that the strike affected students' economic well-being was through interference with plans for starting a summer job. In total, 62% of students said the dispute affected their plans for a summer job and for 37% the impact of the strike on their ability to begin a summer job

presented a big problem.

Twenty eight percent of survey respondents stated that the strike was interfering with their part-time job and for 13% this was a big problem.

In terms of additional expenditures, 17% of students reported spending more money than anticipated on food. Eight percent mentioned that this unanticipated expense represented a major problem.

Difficulties were created for 7% of students because of travel plans - air, train, or bus reservations that had to be changed. For two percent of students having to make changes in travel plans was a big problem.

Having to pay additional rent was a problem for 6% of students and a big problem for 5%.

An additional 6% of survey respondents indicated that the strike had interfered with their plans to start full-time jobs lined up for after graduation. Five percent of students indicated that such interference was a big problem.

Finally, 4% of students stated that because of the strike they had a problem with accommodations because a lease was up. This was a big problem for 2%.

Because of contingencies such as the foregoing, 31% of students stated that they had to spend more than anticipated on expenses associated with their education. Fifteen percent indicated that as a result they had to obtain more money. The single most frequently cited source of additional funds, 54%, was parents.

In order to estimate the magnitude of

the additional costs students had to meet because of the strike, they were asked: "So far as you can tell right now, which of the following amounts of money do you need to meet the additional expenses caused by the strike?" Options started at 'less than \$200' and rose in \$200 increments to a maximum of 'more than \$1,000.' On the basis of information collected in this fashion it is estimated that at the time of the survey the conflict had cost students approximately 1.6 million dollars. It must be stressed that this amount does not include losses associated with lost wages from summer or part-time jobs that were affected by the dispute.

Health Costs of Strike

It causes confusion, it causes anger. You think about money. You think about all these things. It does cause stress.

I am suffering not only physical problems, but I am on the verge of having a nervous breakdown. The suffering for me is beyond tolerable levels. I don't know what I am going to do.

I am beyond frustrated. I feel betrayed.

There is a well established link between stress and ill-health. Fortunately, at the time of the survey, the stresses associated with the strike had not yet affected students' health. While the level of reported health was lower than that of the Canadian undergraduate population as reported by Statistics Canada, it was similar to

measures collected in pre-strike surveys at York.

Perspective on Problems

Clearly, the dispute caused a major disruption in students' lives. In order to evaluate the magnitude of this upheaval, students' strike related problems were compared to other problems they had over the academic year. The results of this comparison are shown in the graph on page 7.

Over the academic year, doing well enough to satisfy the expectations of family was the least problematic issue of those shown on the graph: 38% of students reported this as a problem. The large size of some classes was seen as a problem by 47% of students and getting good grades was problematic for 53%. Seventy two percent reported that handling stress had been a problem. Having enough money to meet expenses was a difficulty for 76%.

The large amount of weight given to final exams in some courses was reported as a problem by 77% of survey respondents. This difficulty could be alleviated without major expenditures of resources.

Being able to get into desired courses or programs was problematic for 82% of students.

Most importantly, handling problems caused by the strike was reported as problematic by 96% of students! In essence, the conflict was the most problematic event of the students' year and far outweighed concerns with class size and getting good grades.

Support for the Strike

In view of the academic and financial problems reported by students, it is not surprising, as seen in the graph on page 1, that only 33% said that they supported the strike. Twenty percent were neutral, and 47% opposed it.

In order to determine whether or not student opposition to the strike was a reflection of general anti-union sentiment, feelings about the conflict were juxtaposed with comments on support for unions in general. When this was done, more students supported unions in general (42%) than supported the strike (33%). At the other extreme, more students opposed the strike (47%) than opposed unions in general (29%).

I think the time has come for the government to set a law in order to have those people back to work.

They're both at fault. There's no one person to point a finger to.

The student constituency is being used as a bargaining tool to meet YUFA's ends.

Concern Over Impact

As evident in the graph on page 8, forty seven percent of students felt that faculty and librarians were concerned with the impact of the strike on students and 36% stated that the administration was similarly

concerned. Assessments of lack of concern, however, were more equal. Whereas 44% of students believed that faculty and librarians were not concerned with the implications of the dispute for students, only slightly more, 47%, stated that the administration was not concerned.

It makes me feel that students are commodities. Why is my professor's salary and his retirement pension affecting my investment in my education?

The administration and YUFA both say they are concerned about the students - if so, then why are we in this situation? This is no way to say you care.

Perhaps more important than these differences is the obvious fact that from the students' point of view neither YUFA nor the administration was concerned with the consequences of the strike, i.e. fewer than 50% saw either as being concerned with the impact of the conflict on students.

Communication

Overall, there was no single main source from which students obtained information on the conflict. Indeed, given the sources of information mentioned, it is likely that many students had misinformation regarding the strike's progress. This lack of information could only have increased the anxiety they experienced over the extension of the school year and the delay of the examination period.

The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint

Like, I don't know anything at all about the strike. It just comes.

There's all these rumours going around and you don't know. You don't have any clear answers as to what is going on.

The most frequently cited source of information on the strike, 22%, was talking with other students. Next in terms of frequency, 20%, was the Internet. Newspapers were mentioned by 19% of students, 12% mentioned 'other' sources, and 10% and 4% referred to television and radio respectively. Only 10% mentioned information handed out on the picket line and a mere 2% referred to information distributed by the administration. Clearly, the vast majority of students only had second-hand information or rumours on which to base their evaluations of developments in the strike.

In view of these findings, it is not surprising that only 34% and 22% of students felt that YUFA and the administration had effectively communicated to them the main issues in the strike.

Student Mobilization

Students were asked a series of questions designed to measure their level of involvement in a variety of strike related activities. Not surprisingly, 99% said that they had discussed the dispute with other students and 86% had read about the strike in a newspaper; however, only 6% reported having written to newspapers, or calling talk-shows, to

air their views on the strike.

Although most classes were cancelled, 84% of students had come to campus during the dispute. Moreover, 51% had raised strike related concerns with a faculty member and 50% had talked to someone on staff about a strike related matter.

Despite their presence on campus at one time or another, and the attempts of both YUFA and the York Federation of Students (YFS) to provide discussion forums, only 16% of students had attended any meetings about the strike. Fewer still, 5%, reported joining YUFA on the picket line.

Where are those people [YFS] who should be fighting for us? They are striking with YUFA!!!! I don't care if they believe in YUFA's cause. They should be there for us.

Collectively, these findings suggest that while the strike was a subject of discussion among students, and the majority read about the dispute in newspapers, few attempted to raise their concerns about the strike in a public forum outside the university. Moreover, although the majority of students at one point or another were on campus during the conflict, apart from contacting professors and staff, few engaged in strike related activities inside the university. In essence, likely because York is a commuter campus, conditions were insufficient to mobilize students either for or against the strike.

Student Satisfaction

Surveys conducted prior to the strike at York show that among first year students, 68% were satisfied with their academic program at York. For graduating students the figure was 74%.

After a week of the strike, all I wanted to do was to finish the term. Now I don't even want that. I feel like I want the pass/fail option so I can go to another university (a real one) and finish the few courses I have left.

Not surprisingly, the strike affected students' satisfaction with their overall academic program. Only 57% reported that they were satisfied. In essence, the difference in satisfaction between the average for the pre-strike surveys (71%) and the strike mean (57%) is 14%.

In view of the havoc wrought by the strike, it was surprising that a majority of students still expressed satisfaction with their academic programs and that the damage to satisfaction done by the dispute was only fourteen percent. This may indicate that positive pre-strike experiences of students, at least at the time the survey was conducted, withstood the impact of strike related disruptions. If this is in fact the case, with a concerted effort, after the dispute it may be possible to regain student confidence.

Conclusion

The intent of this report has been to examine the strike from the students' point of view, not to argue its merits. Accordingly, in the questionnaire planning phase, students were asked what issues were relevant to them. Not surprisingly, matters like progress through the ranks, the administration's ability to pay, and so on, were hardly mentioned. Instead, students wanted to talk about the impact of the strike on courses and jobs. As a result, the final questionnaire reflected these concerns.

At a very general level it is possible to conclude that students did not feel that an improvement in their education would be one of the outcomes of the dispute. What they were certain of was that the conflict had caused considerable academic and economic hardship. Moreover, as far as most students were concerned, neither YUFA nor the administration had the short-term interests of students foremost in mind. Whether or not this is a realistic appraisal of events is not the issue.

To focus on more specific issues, throughout the strike, YUFA linked the struggle with class size and other issues of potential interest to students; however, as far as students were concerned, the dispute was about money.

Moreover, students believed that after the strike the education they would receive at York would not be that much different than in the past. If there were to be a change, it would be for the worse.

The strike resulted in the cancellation of most classes and despite Senate's attempt to deal with some of the academic fall-out of the conflict, students believed that in large numbers of courses the term would be extended and that they would be required to complete final exams or performances on campus. As a result, there was considerable dissatisfaction with steps that could be taken to make up for time lost in the strike.

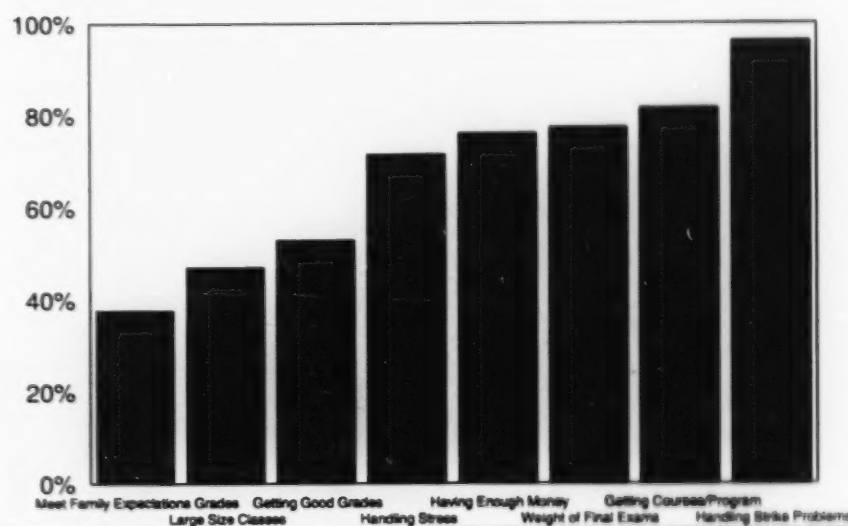
It is clear that substantial problems were created for students because of the cancellation of courses. For the vast majority the open-ended nature of the strike was the major concern. Most were also concerned with the

possibility that the nature of course requirements would change, that they might forget important materials for exams, that necessary materials would not be covered in some courses, and that because of time lost professors might be less than diligent in their marking practices. Some students feared that because of the strike they would not be able to achieve the marks required to get in, or to stay in, particular programs.

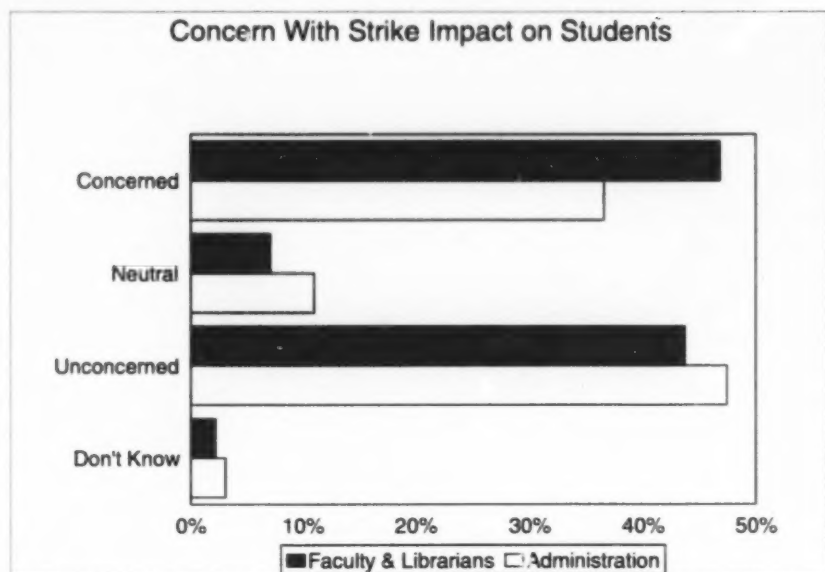
Many students worried that the strike would interfere with their summer school plans. Others were concerned with graduation and the fact that they would not be able to send marks to potential employers. Still others worried about the possibility that grades would not be available to send to other schools to which they had applied.

On the economic front, most students feared that the strike would interfere

Issues Rated Problematic by Students



The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint



with their summer jobs and full-time jobs lined up for after graduation. Indeed, many stated that the conflict had already affected their part-time jobs. Moreover, because of the increase in the length of the term, some students spent more money on things like food and accommodation than they had anticipated.

Overall, up to the time of the survey, the strike had cost students approximately 1.6 million dollars. And this figure does not include losses associated with summer and full-time job delays. Given the family incomes of York students, losses such as these are considerable.

When problems created by the strike were compared to other problems faced during the academic year, it was seen that strike related difficulties were by far the most significant problems faced by York students this year.

In view of the main issues in the conflict as seen by students, the strike related academic and financial

problems they faced, and perhaps because of the relatively low incomes of their families, it is understandable that only about one third of York students supported the strike. It is worth noting in this connection that the relatively low level of support given to the strike is not a reflection of opposition to unions in general.

Despite their lack of support for the strike, a few more students viewed faculty and librarians as being concerned with the impact of the conflict on students than the administration. In general, however, students viewed neither as being concerned with the consequences of the strike for students.

Throughout the strike it is likely that students would have given failing marks to both YUFA and the administration in terms of communicating to them the main issues of the dispute. Indeed, one is left with the impression that most of students' information on the conflict was second hand and/or based on rumour.

Although students had a major interest in the progress and outcome of the strike, few took steps to affect the outcome. On a commuter campus, this is understandable.

Finally, despite the impact of the strike on students' lives, a surprisingly large number expressed satisfaction with their academic program at York. As a result, after the strike, with a concerted effort, it may be possible to repair for students remaining at York some of the damage done by the conflict. For those graduating, or for those who may leave the university because of the dispute, it may be too late.

J. Paul Grayson

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